

Enhancing English Proficiency among Polytechnics Students: Promoting Autonomous Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to enhance English Language Proficiency amongst polytechnic students. It focuses on students' communication skill. A number of 39 semester one students from Diploma in Tourism and Management involved in this study. There were three objectives of this research. First, to find out students' difficulties in English communication; second, to find out students' attitudes in learning English and third, to promote authentic teaching and learning English activities. The given pre-test showed that 33.3% of the students did not achieve the desired passing mark which was 50%. A number of problems have been identified as the causes for the students to falter in this test. The collection of data was done through the administration of a questionnaire, pre-test, post-test and observation. Actions implemented were new learning style with English songs, reflective journal and English clinic. The administered treatment has resulted in a significant increase in communication skills among students. 71.8% of the students scored more than 50% in the given posttest. In addition, students showed positive attitudes during teaching and learning sessions.

KEYWORDS: English Proficiency, Difficulties, Attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, polytechnics are recognized by the worldwide as one of institutions that provide higher education level. The polytechnic is one of the institutions produce high skilled worker at par with other universities. In United Kingdom, after the passage of the Further Higher Education Act 1992 polytechnics became independent universities which meant that they can award their own degree.

In Malaysia, Polytechnic Education Department director-general, Datuk Mohlis Jaafar said seven of the degree level programs will be implemented at 3 premier polytechnics namely Ungku Omar Polytechnic, Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah Polytechnic and Ibrahim Sultan Polytechnic after officiating at the 43rd convocation of the Ungku Omar Polytechnic on 7th April 2014.

In line with the mission of Malaysian Polytechnics to break boundaries for the creation of transformative and creative learning environment for an innovation-led economy and the vision to be Malaysia's number one provider innovative human capital through transformational education and training for the global workforce by 2015, English acquisition among polytechnic students is crucial.

Many students struggle to express themselves in the language because outside the classroom, they have essentially little or no contact with the language. Again, students in majority find it is difficult to express themselves in grammatically correct English. This can be clearly seen through activity that had been conducted on the first day of class among semester 1 Politeknik Hulu Terengganu (PHT) students. Students were asked to introduce themselves in front of the class within 5 to 7 minutes in English. Only 15% students were able to introduce themselves. Besides that, from the students' reflections on the first lesson 99% of students admitted that they do not know how to pronounce English words, 95% were confused with spelling and phonology of English language and 100% were not able to comprehend and create their own sentence structure. These matters really concern the researcher.

This situation can be reflected to a framework proposed by Rivers and Temperley [3], whereby they provide a diagram (Figure 1) which represents the processes involved in learning to communicate and which distinguishes between skill-using and skill getting.

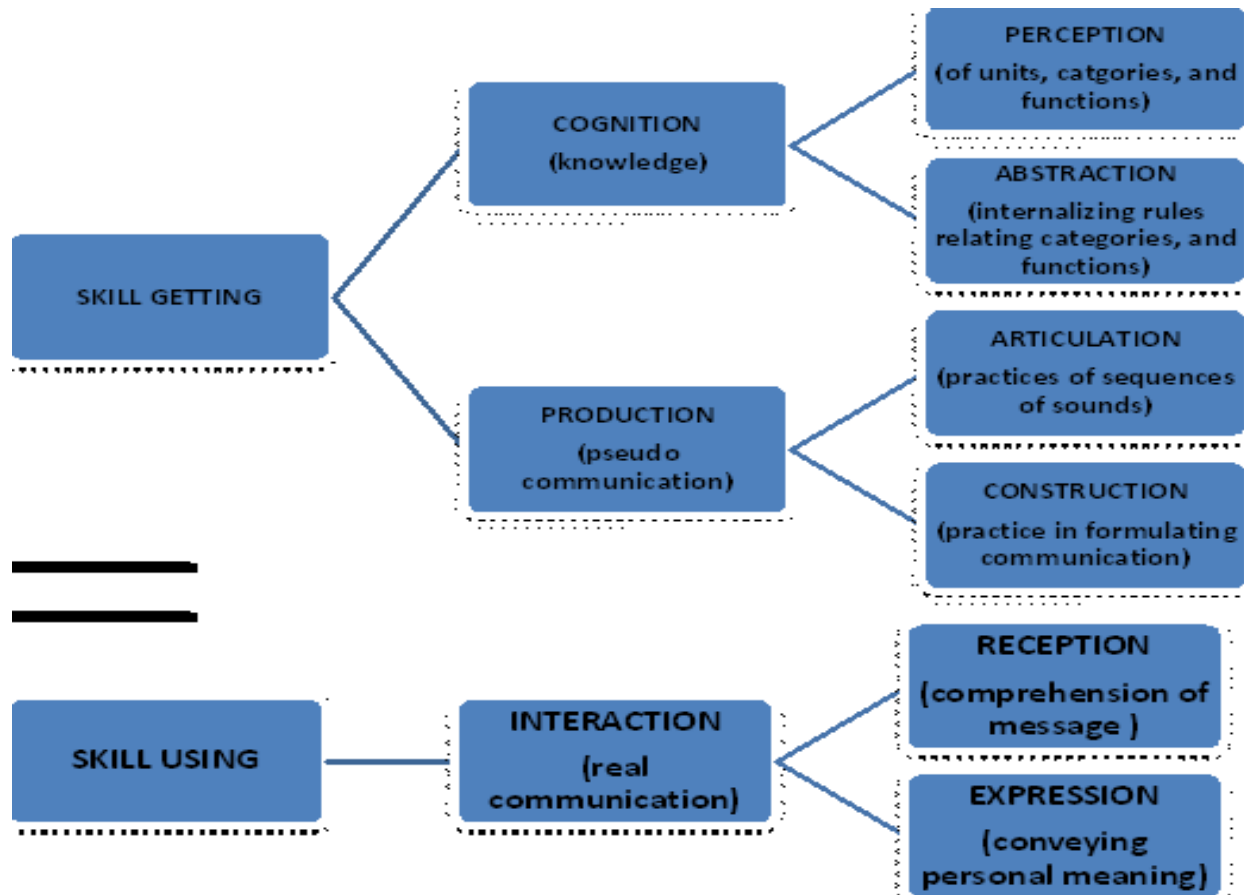


Figure 1: Rivers and Temperley's framework

Skill getting and skill using are connected to the traditional distinction between controlled or practical activities, in which learners manipulate grammatical and phonological forms and transfer activities in which learners apply their newly acquired mastery of linguistic forms to the production (and comprehension) of communicative language. Some student just got the chance in the phase of skill getting and do not get the chance to move to the next phase which is skill using. That is why Rivers and Temperley distinguished between three kinds of activity:

1. Oral practice for the learning of grammar
2. Structured interaction
3. Autonomous interaction

FOCUS OF THE STUDY

The focus of this study was to obtain information on factors that contribute towards lack of proficiency in speaking skill among semester one Diploma Tourism and Management of Politeknik Hulu Terengganu students. This step is very important in order to plan on how to help students to improve their communication skills.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

General Objective

The purpose of this study is to find out factors of students are not able to communicate and use English in Communicative English class at Politeknik Hulu Terengganu.

Specific Objectives

- to find out students' difficulties in English communication.
- to find out students' attitudes in learning English.

- to promote authentic teaching and learning English activities.

Focus Group

Respondents for this study were 39 students from Diploma in Tourism Management who were in semester 1 in the session on December 2013 at Politeknik Hulu Terengganu. The students mostly came from middle class families. Their English classes are the only opportunities to be exposed to the authentic use of English language. Majority of the students had studied English for a number of years since kindergarten in primary school and secondary school. They were able to listen, speak and write simple English. But, their limited use of English hindered their language learning.

METHODOLOGY

This research was designed according to action research. According to [5], action research is inquiry or research in the context of focused efforts to improve the quality of an organization and its performance. It typically is designed and conducted by practitioners who analyze the data to improve their own practice". In teaching context, according to [4], action research is a natural part of teaching. Teachers are continually observing students, collecting data and changing practices to improve student learning and the classroom and school environment. Action research provides a framework that guides the energies of teachers toward a better understanding of why, when and how students become better learners".

Pre-Test and Post-Test

A set of an oral test was conducted. The pre-test was conducted to examine how far the 39 students from the target group had mastered speaking skill. This pre-test was done before the action plan was carried out and the post-test was carried out after the action was implemented.

Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was conducted at the start of the study to collect data on students' perceptions of their difficulties in English communication. Besides that, the questionnaire was constructed to identify students' attitudes in learning English. Then, varieties of innovative and authentic activities were introduced. Afterwards, identical questionnaire has been distributed to get students' perceptions about their lessons after the actions implemented. Students' perceptions and opinions before and after the changes was compared and analyzed.

Observation

An observation was conducted to detect students' attitudes to use English in their communication. Based on the observation, it was detected that students find that speaking English is difficult. Students must be pushed to use dictionary and to practice pronunciation. Besides that, they rely too much on the lecturer. A number of 39 students were observed.

DATA ANALYSIS

Questionnaire

Students' difficulties in English communication based on data analysis from questionnaires it was found that, students' difficulties in English communication shown in the Figure 1 and Table 1.

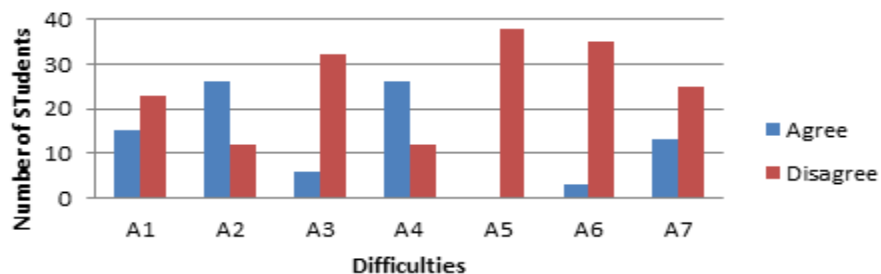


Figure 1: Students' difficulties in English communication

According to Figure 1, 15 students can spell English words easily and 23 students cannot spell them easily. 26 students get confused between spelling and pronunciation of words in English. Only six students can create sentences with correct sentence structure. 26 students have limited vocabularies. None of the students can use correct grammar. Only three students understand different accents of English and only 13 students understand British English pronunciation.

Table 1: Students' difficulties in English communication

No.	Item	Percentage	
		Agree	Do Not Agree
A1	I can spell English words easily.	39.4	60.6
A2	I do not confuse between spelling and pronunciation of English words.	31.6	68.4
A3	I can create sentences with correct sentence structure.	15.8	84.2
A4	I have enough vocabularies.	31.6	68.4
A5	I can use correct grammar.	0	100
A6	I understand different accents of English.	39.5	60.5
A7	I understand British English pronunciation.	34.2	65.8

Based on the Table 1, the main problem was 100% of the students cannot use correct grammar followed by 84.2% students cannot create sentences with correct sentence structure. The grammar seems as major problems among students in order to communicate in English. If students are able to create sentences with correct order, students will be able to speak and communicate in English. This is related to a three-dimensional grammar framework in dealing with the complexity of grammar. It consists of three dimensions must concern us: structure or form, semantics or meaning and the pragmatic conditions governing use. If the students are exposed to these three aspects of grammar, they will be able to construct sentences [1].

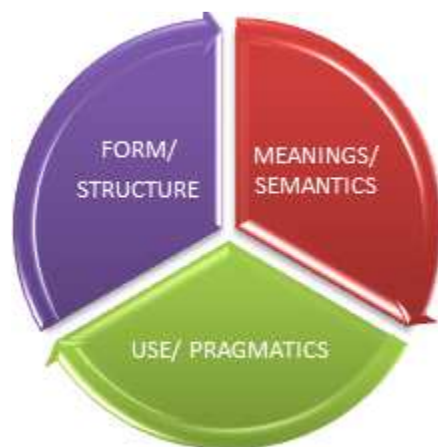


Figure 2: A three-dimensional grammar framework

Another difficulty of the students is British pronunciation. 65.8% students cannot understand British English pronunciation. Usually, students cannot understand and cannot respond to English conversation due to the lack of understanding of British pronunciations especially when they listen to native speakers conversations. Pronunciation was a central component in language teaching during the audio lingual era. Evidence for the critical period hypothesis suggested that native-like pronunciation was an unrealistic goal for second language learners, particularly older learner. However, our target in teaching and learning English at polytechnic are being able to understand and being understood.

Besides that, other problems faced by students were 60.6% of the students cannot spell English words easily and 60.5% of the students cannot understand different accents of English. However, only 31.6% students get confused between spelling and pronunciation of English words and have limited vocabularies. In [2]found that effort and the use of good learning strategies such as keeping a notebook, looking words up in the dictionary and reviewing what has been learned were associated with better vocabulary development.

Students' Attitudes in Learning English

Data analysis of questionnaires which conducted have found that those students' attitudes in learning English shown in the Figure3 and Table 2.

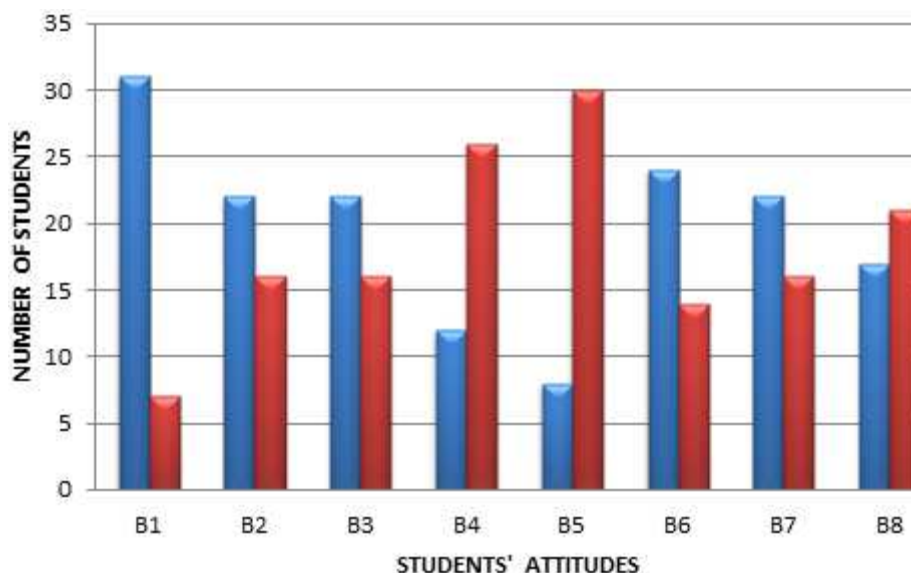


Figure 3: Students' attitudes in learning English

Based on Figure 3, seven students did not like English. Besides that, 16 students did not read English materials at least once a week. Only 22 students used an English dictionary to check spelling, 12 students used an English dictionary to check the pronunciation and only eight students listened to English materials to improve their English skill. 24 students were interested to check pronunciation on their own, 22 students motivated to practice pronunciation on their own and it was found that 21 students agreed that learning English is difficult.

Table 2: Students' learning English attitudes

No.	Item	Percentage	
		Agree	Do Not Agree
B1	I love English.	81.6	18.4
B2	I read English materials at least once a week.	57.9	42.1
B3	I use an English dictionary to check spelling.	57.9	42.1
B4	I use an English dictionary to check pronunciation.	31.6	68.4
B5	I listen to English materials to improve my English skill.	21.1	78.9
B6	I am interested to check pronunciation on my own.	63.2	36.8
B7	I like to practice pronunciation on my own.	57.9	42.1
B8	Learning English is difficult.	44.7	53.0

Based on the Table 2, the major problem was 78.9% of the students were not interested to listen to English materials to improve their English language. The second problem was 68.4% of the students did not use an English dictionary to check pronunciation. This showed that students did not learn the language on their own. They rely too much on the lecturer to give the correct pronunciation.

Furthermore, there were 53% of the students found learning English is difficult. Students did not enjoy learning English in class. Even though they had learnt English from primary school, students still cannot change their mindset that learning English is easy. Besides that, 42.1% of the students did not read English materials at least once a week, did not use an English dictionary to check spelling and did not like to practice pronunciation on their own. These findings showed that students rely too much on lecturer to improve their communication skills and just learn English in class. Reading and listening are important skills to increase learners' English proficiency. There is a proposal for classroom teaching method proposed by [2] which is "Just listen...and read". It is based on the hypothesis that language acquisition takes place when learners are exposed to comprehensible input through listening and/or reading.

Analysis of Pre Test

Table 3: Analysis of pre-test

Stage	Pre Test	Percentage(%)
A(25-30)	3	7.7
B (20-24)	14	35.9
C (19-15)	9	23
D (10-14)	12	30.8
F (0-9)	1	2.6

A set of test was carried out to assess students' speaking skill. The assessment was based on the rubrics provided in the syllabus of Communicative English 1 (AE 101).

Based on Table 1, three of them scored A (7.7%), 14 scored B (35.9%), nine out of 39 students scored C (23%) while a number of 12 students managed to score D (30.8%) and one student failed badly with an F grade (2.6%). It was found that students cannot construct correct sentence structures.

Analysis of Observation

Based on the observation, most students showed that learning English is difficult. This has resulted in them not having the relevant or appropriate language skills and did not enjoy during teaching and learning process. The lack of practice inside and outside the classroom also contributed towards the inability of the students to communicate in English. It was found that many of them lack of confidence to speak in English due to the limited vocabularies. Besides that, lack of pronunciation skill also caused the problem. From the observation as young generations, they are really interested to listen to English songs and all of the students prefer to listen rather than to read English materials to improve their English language skill. For the purpose of this study, it was believed that students need to increase their intrinsic motivation that matches their interest to improve their speaking skills.

In conclusion, the main problem in speaking difficulties among PHT students is grammar. This leads to the second issue which is students are not able to comprehend their own sentences due to the lack of grammar knowledge. These two problems are closely related. In terms of attitudes, students are lack of intrinsic motivation to learn English. So that, they did not read and listen to English materials and they did not make use of English to English dictionary. Besides that, students rely too much on the lecturer to spoon-feed because they just wait to the lecturer to give the right spelling and the right pronunciation.

MEASURES IMPLEMENTED

After deliberation, there were three activities was implemented the action research on improving the students' writing skill.

- Learning through English songs
- Reflective journal
- English clinic: "Get it right in the end"

ACTION IMPLEMENTED

Learning Through English Songs

Lecturer needs to promote authentic and autonomous learning because in an informal second language environment, younger learners are usually allowed to be silent until they are ready to speak. On the other hand, older learners are often forced to speak. They do not have opportunities to practice their second language 'voice' in songs and games that allow them to blend their voice.

Students need to learn English outside the classroom on their own, since 4 hours meeting in a week cannot help the students to learn every single part in the classroom. So that, by introducing songs students will get the motivation to read and listen to English materials on their own outside the classroom.

Furthermore, by promoting suitable English songs and introducing the way they can use English songs to improve their spelling, vocabularies and pronunciation of different accents, adult learners will get the same opportunities like younger learners. By listening to English songs and sing the song together, this will help students to change their mindset that learning English is not difficult and they can learn English on their own in the way they like. Songs used to be:

1. Freedom
2. Awaken
3. One big family
4. My little girl
5. Hold My Hand
6. So Soon

Duration:	15 minutes in every class
Time:	Induction set in 2 hours class
Steps:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students are given the lyrics of a song with few blanks. 2. Two students will be asked to read the lyrics. 3. Lecturer lists down words that students cannot pronounce. 4. Lecturer asks students to pronounce all the listed words without telling the right pronunciation. 5. Lecturer asks students to fill in the blanks while listening to the song and pay attention to the words that has been listed. 6. Lecturer plays the songs two times. 7. Lecturer asks students to check their answers with correct spelling. 8. Lecturer then asks students to pronounce the listed words, according to the pronunciation from the song. 9. Lecturer asks students to analyze the tenses used and sentence structure in the song. 10. Lastly, lecturer asks the students to sing the song together by following the right pronunciation.

Reflective Journal

English language must be used in order to get familiar with the rules. Reflective journal is one of the ways students can use the language with their own style to express themselves. The lecturer asked students to prepare an interesting notebook like a diary. Students were given 10 minutes before lecturer ended the class to reflect what they have learned and share whatever they want to share by writing in the reflective journal like free writing. Lecturer provided the suggested topics, but did not rigid with the topic which are:

1. My family
2. My future plan
3. Oh, my English!
4. Today
5. BFF
6. Idol

Students also can draw, can put pictures and decorate the journal depends on their creativity as long as they use the English language and must be more than 50 words. Then, lecturer collected, read and give comments on the journal once a week. Lecturer passed the journal in the next class and students read the comments from the lecturer. Students wrote the next topic and lecturer can see the students' progress from time to time, especially in terms of spelling, grammar and sentence structure. Indirectly, students need to open dictionary to write and read English materials besides improving their vocabularies and the most importantly is students become more motivated to learn and improve their English communication. This is based on Krashen's Monitor Model [6], which describes the lesson plan. It involves:

1. Acquisition-learning hypothesis (rules and form)
2. Monitor hypothesis (correct language)
3. Natural order hypothesis (spontaneous)
4. Input hypothesis (a step beyond the level)
5. Affective filter hypothesis (feelings, motives, needs, attitudes, emotional)

Affective filter is a metaphorical barrier that prevents learners from acquiring knowledge, even appropriate input is available. So that, reflective journal can help lecturer to motivate students in their reflective journal. In [2] found that effort and the use of good learning strategies such as keeping a notebook, looking words up in the dictionary and reviewing what has been learned were associated with better vocabulary development.

English Clinic: “Get it Right in the End”

Time	6 hours
Objectives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Increase students' awareness to use English to English dictionary. Introduce dictionary registers. Introduce basic grammar forms and rules.
Activity 1 (Dictionary register) 30 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Students were introduced to dictionary registers that students are not familiar with. Lecturer asked students of a few questions that students always get confused: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Which is the right spelling? Couseling or counselling? Colour or color? When can we use importance and important? What are the differences of hear and listen? Watch and see? What are the differences between fault, blame and mistakes? Lecturer explained on how to get all the answers in the dictionary.
Activity 2 (Phonetic symbols) 30 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Students were provided English to English dictionaries. Lecturer introduced phonetic symbols. Students were divided into four groups and were asked to transcribe a lyric of English song on mahjong paper. Students presented the lyrics and the rest will guess the words.
Activity 3 (Skill Getting) 3 hours	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Lecturer divided students into 8 groups. One topic of part of speech was given to each group. Students were asked to present about the forms and rules of each within 15-20 minutes. Lecturer comments and explains more about parts of speech.
Activity 4 (Skill Using) 1 hour	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Lecturer provided gapped dialogues to students. Lecturer asked students to fill in the dialogues. Lecturer formed group works. Students practiced the dialogues in the groups.
Activity 5 (Skill Using) 1 hour	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> In a group of five, students were given situations. Lecturer asked each group to act out within 7-10 minutes.

REFLECTION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The Comparison between After and Before the Implementation of English Clinic

Table 4: Comparison between after and before the implementation of English clinic

No.	Item	Percentage		Finding Status
		Before	After	
A1	Can spell English words easily.	39.4	52.6	13.2 % (improve)
A2	Confuse between spelling and pronunciation of English words.	68.4	28.9	39.5% (improve)
A3	Can create sentences with correct sentence structure.	15.8	65.8	50% (improve)
A4	Have limited vocabularies.	68.4	39.5	28.9% (improve)
A5	Can use correct grammar.	0	63.2	63.2% (improve)
A6	Understand different accents of English.	39.5	78.9	39.4% (improve)
A7	Understand British English pronunciation.	34.2	89.5	55.3 % (improve)

After the implementation of English clinic, the same questionnaire was distributed to analyze the students' difficulties in learning English. A very great improvement can be seen in using correct English grammar with 63.2% improvement. Then, 89.5% of students understand British English pronunciation compared to 34.2% only understand the pronunciation before the implementation of English clinic. Besides that, 50% improvement in creating sentences with correct sentence structure. 39.5% improvement of the confusion between spelling and pronunciation of English words. 39.4% improvement in understanding different accents of English. Before the implementation of English clinic, 68.4% of the students had limited vocabularies decreased to 39.5% with 28.9% of improvement. 13.2 % improvement also in spelling English words.

The Comparison between After and Before the Implementation of Learning through English Songs

Table 5: Comparison between After and Before the Implementation of Learning through English Songs

	Item	Percentage		Finding Status
		Before	After	
B1	I love English.	81.6	91.7	10.1%(improve)
B2	I read English materials at least once a week.	57.9	72.2	14.3%(improve)
B3	I use an English dictionary to check spelling.	57.9	97.0	39.1% (improve)
B4	I use an English dictionary to check pronunciation.	31.6	86.1	54.5%(improve)
B5	I listen to English materials to improve my English skill.	21.1	94.4	73.3%(improve)
B6	I am interested to check pronunciation on my own.	63.2	86.1	22.9%(improve)
B7	I like to practice pronunciation on my own.	57.9	86.1	28.2%(improve)

From the Table 5, it can be seen that after the implementation of learning with English songs, students' attitudes have been changed in many aspects. First, attitudes in listening to English materials increased to 94.4% with 73.3% improvement. Second, in terms of dictionary usage, there were 54.4% improvement in using English dictionary to check the pronunciation and there were 39.1% improvement in using English dictionary to check spelling. Third, it can be seen a very great improvement in self-learning time. 28.2% improvement in practicing pronunciation on their own and 22.9% improvement in their interest to check pronunciation on their own. Fourth, the reading habits of the students also improve by 14.3% read English materials at least once a week. The last one is an improvement in students' interest in English language. Before the implementation, only 82.6% of the students love English. But after the action taken, 91.7% of the students love the English language.

The Comparison between After and Before the Implementation of Reflective Journal

The last assessment for AE 101, oral presentation was considered as post-test for this research. The assessment was based on the rubrics provided. This is the comparison of the pre and post test result.

Table 6: Result of pre-test and post-test

Grade	Pre-test (%)	Post-Test (%)
A (25-30)	7.7	15.4
B (20-24)	35.9	17.9
C (19-15)	23	51.7
D (10-14)	30.8	28.2
F (0-9)	2.6	0

From the Table 6, there was an improvement of the result for the post-test and pre-test. For the pre-test, only 7.7% of the students score A. In the post-test, 15.4% of the students score A. Besides that, in the pre-test, 2.6% of the students fail but in the post-test none of the students fail the test.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The study suggests an extent for something else. In addition, there could be future research of similar study although it could be more extensive. The following suggestions and recommendations are offered for future research.

1. Involve both courses at Politeknik Hulu Terengganu which are Diploma in Tourism Management and Diploma in Accountancy as respondents, so that the data will be more reliable.
2. It is suggested to have another instrument which is interview to increase the validity of the research.
3. Determine the other possible objectives or variables like learners' characteristics and learning conditions.
4. Focus groups of the respondents are specifically students from Terengganu.

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